DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 025 PS 025 903

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TITLE	Getting a Good Start in School.
INSTITUTION	National Education Goals Panel, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1997-01-00
NOTE	13p.; This document has been reviewed and condensed by the Goal 1 Early Childhood Assessments Resource Group from ED 391 576.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Education Goals Panel, 1255 22nd Street, N.W., Suite 502, Washington, DC 20037; phone: 202-724-0015; fax: 202-632-0957; e-mail: NEGP@goalline.org; www: http://www.negp.gov
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cognitive Style; Early Childhood Education; Early Experience; Emotional Development; Interpersonal Competence; *Learning Readiness; Physical Development; Prior Learning; *School Readiness; Student Adjustment; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS	*Goals 2000

ABSTRACT

In 1990, the National Education Goals were established by the President and the 50 state governors. Goal 1 states that by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn. This booklet is a condensed version of an earlier document intended to further amplify the dimensions of early learning and development used by the National Educational Goals Panel to measure progress toward Goal 1. Following a list of objectives of Goal 1 and a look at the subjective nature of assessing learning readiness, the booklet briefly discusses the following five dimensions that contribute to school preparedness: (1) health and physical development; (2) emotional well-being and social competence, serving as the foundation for relationships which give meaning to the school experience; (3) approaches to learning, referring to the inclinations, dispositions or styles by which children acquire knowledge; (4) communicative skills, including language, and reading and writing processes; and (5) cognition and general knowledge, the sum of children's early experiences and how they record those experiences. Characteristics of five children considered ready to learn are noted, highlighting the different combination of strengths and weaknesses along the five dimensions. The booklet concludes with a list of publications about or related to readiness, for parents, educators, and policymakers. (HTH)

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GETTING A GOOD START IN SCHOOL

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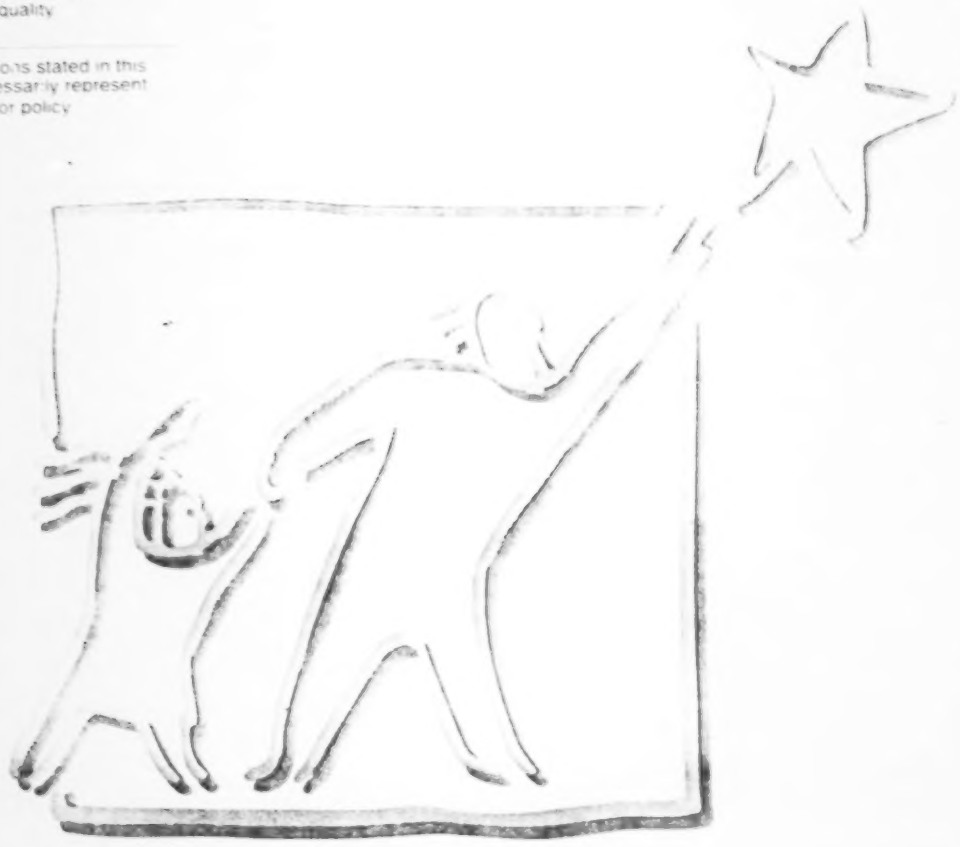

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January 1997

GETTING A GOOD START IN SCHOOL

A document based on *Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary,* edited by Sharon Lynn Kagan, Evelyn Moore, and Sue Bredekamp, with the support of the Goal 1 Technical Planning Group on Readiness for School.

Reviewed and condensed by Carol Copple and the Goal 1 Early Childhood Assessments Resource Group.

Goal 1: Ready to Learn

By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

Objectives:

- All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.
- Every parent in the United States will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping such parent's preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support parents need.
- Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn, and the number of low-birthweight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.

All children in America should start school ready to learn. Few Americans would argue with this vision, the first of the National Education Goals, which were adopted in 1989 with wide bipartisan support. But to reach a goal we must have a very clear idea of what we mean by it. For decades, school staff and parents have spoken of children's "readiness." Yet, when it comes to what children really need in order to be ready, people's ideas vary widely. We know that children are learning from birth, long before they start school. However, when they enter classrooms, the context of the learning and the things that they learn change in important ways.

To help schools and communities achieve the readiness goal, the National Education Goals Panel recognized the importance of drawing together the best-informed thinking of experts about what it means to be ready to learn. The interdisciplinary group of experts articulated a broad concept of readiness, with at least five major threads that together form the fabric of children's school readiness: health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; approaches to learning; communicative skills; and cognition and general knowledge.

A child may be very strong in one or two of these areas and quite weak in others. This "mixed bag" of children's readiness is evident when we look at the five children profiled on page 6. We can see for ourselves what the experts on children's development emphasize: The answer to the question "Is this child ready to learn?" is never a simple yes or no.

Unfortunately, we cannot test young children and compute a "readiness quotient" for each child. Such testing would not provide an accurate and fair picture of children's actual prospects for succeeding in school. In part, this is because a young child's responses are very likely to differ with slight changes in the wording and test materials or with a different tester or setting. Further, in the early childhood years, children vary a great deal, with normally developing children growing in different ways and at different paces. Not only do children develop differently, but they develop in spurts; mastering something today that was

impossible yesterday is normal, so that a child's test performance on Monday may be quite different from what it would be even on Friday.

So trying to pin down a child's readiness by a test at a single point in time might seem to be handy, but it is not wise. It would be even more unwise to base big decisions—like whether or not a child should enter kindergarten—on such a test. Despite our eagerness to ensure that children get a good beginning, we need to be wary of classifying four- or five-year-olds as "ready" and "unready," because such judgments (and they are not more than that) can become self-fulfilling prophecies. No, the real story of children's readiness is far more complex than what can be revealed by a single test.

To get a clear picture of children's readiness, we must take a close look at them, and that look must draw on multiple sources of information rather than relying on a single assessment. We need to talk to parents and other caregivers; we need to talk with the child; and we need to observe the child in various contexts. These are not quick and easy ways to learn about children, but they are necessary in order to get a full and accurate view of each child.

Further, when we consider children's readiness, we need to capture a full and realistic picture of their learning and development. To do this, we need to better understand the five dimensions that contribute significantly to children's success in formal school:

Health and physical development

Healthy children enjoy a robustness that allows them to engage actively and vigorously in the full range of life experiences. Alert and energetic, they are able to give their full attention to learning experiences. When children do have health problems, treatment is essential to prevent harmful effects on children's school preparedness and success. In many cases, children with disabilities or chronic health problems are able to use their other strengths to compensate for the difficulties they experience from a potentially limiting condition. Children's health—which is repeatedly linked to school performance by a growing body of research—is clearly an important thread in the complex fabric that is "school readiness."

Emotional well-being and social competence

Children's school experience is more positive and productive when they have a sense of personal well-being, grounded in stable, caring relationships in their early lives. Unhappy, fearful, or angry children are preoccupied, unable to give their full attention and engagement to learning experiences. A solid base of emotional security and social competence enables children to participate fully in learning experiences and form good relationships with teachers and peers. In building and maintaining such relationships, key social skills are: respecting the rights of others, relating to peers without being too submissive or overbearing, being willing to give and receive support, and treating others as one would like to be treated. To the extent that children develop these social skills and attitudes, they function better in the school setting.

Approaches to learning

Just as we adults approach our lives and work in different ways, children vary widely in their approaches to learning. Some children are intellectually playful and open to new learning tasks, while others are more deliberate and slower to experiment or take on new challenges. Following through on difficult tasks is natural to some children but foreign to others. Some children are far more reflective than others. Although the phrase "approaches to learning" as an umbrella term for individuals' attitudes, habits, and learning styles has only recently been adopted by educational researchers, the concept is not new to anyone who knows children. We cannot help but see that children's school success, like adults' effectiveness in the workplace, depends not simply on academic skills but also on motivation, learning style, and habits and attitudes.

Communicative skills

Through language, children are able to learn and communicate many things, from finding out how people in other countries live, to telling school friends about something that happened at home. In the course of their communication with teachers and peers and eventually in reading and writing, children construct understandings and acquire knowledge related to various school subjects. Language proficiency has long been recognized as a key predictor of school success, and it is important to emphasize that skills of communication go far beyond vocabulary or grammar. Moreover, research has begun to document the wide variations in how children show their language competence, partly as a function of the differing cultural and linguistic experiences they have had.

Cognition and general knowledge

To live is to learn, and by the time children enter school, they have already taken major steps in becoming competent learners. They are learning to observe and to note similarities and differences; they are developing skills of solving problems and of asking questions. By this age, children have also acquired many ideas about their natural and social world. They may think about where the rain comes from, why things live and die, and how cars move. Such skills and ideas, reflecting an array of experiences in the early years, are what help make children ready to acquire the wealth of knowledge and information that they can draw on in new learning situations.

In considering the five dimensions that contribute to school preparedness, the expectation is not that all children will be 100 percent "ready" on all dimensions BEFORE they enter school. Rather, the goal is to focus attention on children's early lives, from the prenatal period to kindergarten, and to be aware that children's development is nourished in the everyday doings—in the day-to-day play and exploration—of their daily lives.

Supporting children in play and learning, answering their questions, fostering their physical health, creating an understanding of and appreciation for individual

and cultural diversity, and provoking their curiosity are all dimensions of nurturing children's learning and development.

The National Education Goals Panel is committed to ensuring that all children and families are supported in nurturing children's early learning and development. Goal 1—the readiness goal—underscores for policymakers, service providers, and parents that what happens in the years before school makes a crucial difference to school success. What's more, the emphasis on good beginnings encourages schools to take a close look at all children from the outset and to create classroom and learning environments that meet children's diverse needs and nurture their development throughout all the years of formal schooling.

Now we turn to descriptions of five children who are at the age of school entry. Each child has a different combination of strengths and weaknesses along the five dimensions, but all are ready for school.

What do ready children look like? No two look the same.

Jorge

Jorge is a five-and-a-half year old Mexican-American boy who lives in an urban area. Alert, well-coordinated, and confident with peers, Jorge is a frequent leader in active games. He gets fidgety when he has to sit for an extended time. When the teacher asks Jorge a question or tries to engage him in a conversation, he usually gives only a word or two in reply. But he can often be seen regaling his peers or his younger sister with jokes or stories in a fluid mix of Spanish and English.

Kiah

Kiah is a highly verbal, imaginative child who lives in a small town. She is 5 years and 4 months old and is African American. Growing up with four older brothers, she has had little opportunity to learn to work out conflicts with children close to her own age. Although Kiah is outgoing and can be charming with both peers and adults, she is accustomed to getting grownups' attention and protection by crying and tattling. Of course, when she uses these tactics in kindergarten, she annoys the teacher and angers her peers. Kiah also has a habit of giving up on hard tasks, because at home there is always someone older to take over.

Daniel

Daniel is European American and attends school in a rural area. He is 6 years and 2 months old. In some activities, especially science, Daniel shows curiosity and persistence. But because his attention wanders when the teacher is talking, he often fails to follow directions. Daniel keeps to himself most of the time and occasionally strikes out at his older brother or other children. According to his mother, Daniel was talkative and friendly until she and his father separated, which happened just before the start of school.

Li

Li is 5 years and 5 months old. She and her older sister, younger brother, and parents live in a close-knit urban community with other Vietnamese-American families. She has an asthmatic condition and doesn't run and play actively with the other children. Li is very good at tasks that do not require fluent English, and she seems to understand much of what her teachers and peers say. She has greater difficulty dealing with English in situations where there are few clues from context, such as when a friend is telling a story from home or the teacher is playing an audiotape.

Anthony

Living with his widowed mother and grandmother but no siblings, Anthony had little contact with other children before starting school. He is a 6-year-old Lebanese American who lives in the suburbs of a large city. Although Anthony gets along well with adults, he mostly watches from the sidelines as the other children play. His leg braces, which he wears for an orthopedic condition, add to his self-consciousness and perhaps to his classmates' tendency to leave him out of their play. An early and avid reader, Anthony has learned a lot from books and sometimes comes up with bits of information that interest and impress his peers. But he has little knowledge of the peer culture—games, rhymes, chants, or television heroes—and often has trouble entering classmates' conversations and games.

Other publications for parents, educators, and policymakers

Barclay, K., & Boone, E. *Building a Three Way Partnership: The Leader's Role in Linking School, Families and Community*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1991. A research-based book that offers specific, practical strategies for home-school communication, parent education, and volunteerism; also includes integrated approaches to assessment and an annotated bibliography of staff and parent resources.

Boyer, E. *Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1991. A blueprint for action for the readiness of all young Americans.

Decker, L.E., Gregg, G.A., & Decker, V.A. *Getting Parents Involved in Their Children's Education*. 1994. American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209; 703–528–0700. A short book focusing on the strategies to initiate parent involvement and volunteerism in the schools, build partnerships between children's homes and schools, and provide learning activities at home for children and their families.

Early Childhood Education and the Elementary School Principal: Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children. 1990. National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314–3483; 703–684–3345. Developed for and by principals, this book offers 28 standards for early childhood programs; suggests classroom settings and curriculum; and describes roles of the principal, staff, and parents.

Every Child Ready for School: Report of the Action Team on School Readiness. 1992. National Governors' Association, Hall of the States, 444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20001–1512; 202–624–5300. This guide for policymakers identifies the factors that enhance school readiness; suggests benchmarks for states to use as interim measures in their progress towards achieving the goal of ensuring that every child is prepared to start school; and offers a sampling of state initiatives that have been implemented to work toward that goal.

FairTests Publications. *Assessment of Young Children*. National Center for Fair & Open Testing, 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139; 617–864–4810. An annotated bibliography of books, papers, journal articles, and organizations and projects related to the assessment of children below grade three.

Helping Your Child Get Ready for School. 1992. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. ACCESS ERIC, 1600 Research Boulevard, Rockville, MD 20850; 1–800–USE–ERIC. One in a series of books on education topics relating to the National Education Goals, this parent-oriented guide discusses what school readiness is and provides examples of activities and interactions that help children get ready for school.

Kagan, S.L. "Readying Schools for Young Children: Polemics and Priorities." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1994. Phi Delta Kappa, 408 N. Union, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402; 812–339–1156. An article on the importance of policymakers confronting the polemics raised by past and present reform efforts, shedding ambivalence regarding the role of schooling in American society, and dealing head on with action priorities to enable schools and communities to prepare children effectively for school.

Kagan, S.L., Moore, E., & Bredekamp, S. (Eds.) *Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary*. 1995, June. National Education Goals Panel, Goal 1 Technical Planning Group Report 95–03. 1255 22nd Street, N.W., Suite 502, Washington, DC 20037; 202–632–0952. Full report upon which the information in this brochure is based; elaborates the five dimensions of children's early development and learning.

Katz, L.G. "Readiness: Children and Their Schools." *The ERIC Review*, 1992. U.S. Department of Education. ACCESS ERIC, 1600 Research Boulevard, Rockville, MD 20850; 1–800–USE–ERIC. Readiness is the focus of this issue, which includes several useful articles, resources, and a reading list.

Laying the Foundation for School Success: Recommendations for Improving Early Learning Programs. 1992. Maryland Commission on the Early Learning Years, Maryland State Department of Education, 200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, MD 21201; 410–767–0100. Report of a two-year Commission study that looks at making children's early experiences responsive to their characteristics and building home-school-community partnerships that promote young children's school success.

Moving America to the Head of the Class: 50 Simple Things You Can Do. 1994. Education Excellence Partnership, 1615 L Street, N.W., Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20036; 1–800–USA–LEARN. A brief booklet listing things that parents, employers, teachers, principals, administrators, and other concerned persons can do to promote children's readiness and help America reach the National Education Goals.

Ready or Not: What Parents Should Know About School Readiness. 1995, revised. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children; 1–800–424–2460. A brochure to help parents in finding "ready schools" and giving their children a solid foundation for school success.

Testing of Young Children: Concerns and Cautions. 1988. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1509 16th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036; 1–800–424–2460. For parents and teachers, a layperson's version of NAEYC's position statement on standardized testing of children ages 3 through 8.

Your Child Goes to School: A Handbook for Parents of Children Entering School for the First Time (revised). 1995. Maryland State Department of Education, 200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, MD 21201; 410–767–0100. A booklet for parents that addresses common questions such as: "How do I handle opening day jitters?" "Will my child be tested?" and "What activities will help my child succeed?"

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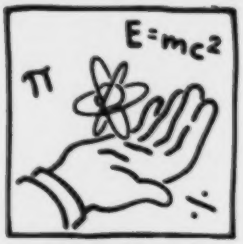

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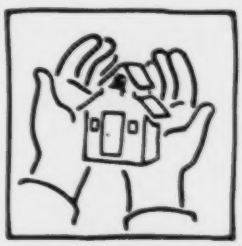

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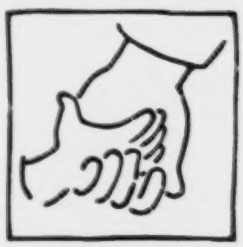

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